

# Vlakplaats Wastewater Treatment Works: 30 years of birding history

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Vlakplaats Wastewater Treatment Works is an 80 *MI* plant situated on the East Rand of Gauteng, between the townships of Khatlehong and Vosloorus. It is adjacent to the Natalspruit wetlands. The wetlands in this area were proclaimed a municipal nature reserve. However, I do not know whether it is still a municipal nature reserve. I do know that it is not managed as a municipal nature reserve. A feature of this wastewater treatment works is its 13 maturation ponds. These ponds are 100 m long by 50 m wide and on average about 1 m deep. These ponds are heavily fringed with Kikuyu grass, reeds, rushes and other marginal vegetation. These ponds and the surrounding areas are frequented by a wide variety of bird species. Some species occur in large numbers.

Intensive bird ringing and birdwatching were conducted in the middle 1970s by Paul and Sheila Whitehouse. They specialised in waterbird trapping and ringing. During the middle 1980s, when I was busy with post-graduate research on metal pollution in the Natalspruit wetlands, I did intensive birdwatching over a number of years. Unfortunately, bird ringing was unknown to me at that time. During the course of these years quite a number of bird species were added to the original list. During the course of a project conducted in the area in the mid-1990s I did some more birdwatching at the wetlands.

Unfortunately the political violence, crime, extensive shack settlements (even on the floodplain), excessive population growth, increase in water pollution and poverty and resultant food shortages are taking their toll on the bird population of this area. An 8-foot high wall topped with electrified razor wire was quite recently built around the treatment plant itself. The numerous fences around the ponds have repeatedly been stolen: fence, poles, concrete and all. Traps and snares are prolific. Weeds have overrun the banks of the ponds, making access quite difficult. Birdwatching from a car with a few gutsy people is still possible. However, bird ringing is out of the question. It is such a pity that this area, which I believe is an important stopover site for many birds, has been degraded to just about nothing.

I have not finished processing all my own and the Whitehouses' birdwatching and bird-ringing results, so the table below is not yet final, but does give an indication of the importance of the site.

Some interesting birding events were the trapping and ringing of a Terek Sandpiper, the occurrence of Knob-billed and White-backed Ducks, the recovery of European-ringed European Swallows and hundreds of flamingos frequenting the often saline waters of the maturation ponds.

In my opinion the maturation ponds and the adjacent wetlands can still be a bird-

Total number of species recorded (1975–1978)	137
Total number of species ringed (1975–1978)	83
Total number of species recorded (1989–present)	146
Total number of species ringed (1989–present)	12
Species observed previously but not during 1989–1993	40
Species with proven breeding status	48
Scarce to rare species (<25% chance of sighting)	37
Fairly common to abundant species (>25% chance of sighting)	69
Palearctic migrants	22

watchers' and ringers' paradise in Gauteng. I know that this area can either be included in the regular CWAC counts or incorporated into the Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme. With the extensive experience of the personnel at BirdLife South Africa and the great success of the Wakkerstroom project to build upon, I hope that:

- the Vlakplaats maturation ponds and the adjacent Natalspruit wetlands can again receive formal protection as a natural area,

- the whole area can be fenced off,
- the area can then be properly maintained,
- hides can then be built,
- interested people from the surrounding community can be taught to become bird guides,
- gate fees can be charged as a means of a partial income,
- intensive bird ringing can be reinstated with the resultant scientific knowledge that will flow from it.

This area must be preserved for posterity.

## The excitements for a UK bird ringer of ringing in Botswana

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Since 1996 I have been enjoying the excitement of ringing birds in Botswana. By excitement I mean the pleasure of handling new species and a wider variety of species than found in the UK. I also mean the unexpected and unpredictable nature of ringing in Botswana by comparison with the UK. Birds in Botswana, as elsewhere in southern Africa, do not show neat patterns of occurrence. A few species are truly resident but most, other than the Palaearctic and intra-African migrants, are opportunistic nomadic or semi-nomadic species, which arrive at, or depart from, a site according to various factors, notably the amount and location of rainfall.

The other excitement for me is the fact that there are huge opportunities for any ringer in southern Africa to make a real contribution to our knowledge of birds in this region. For most species in Africa there is still much to be discovered – on biometrics and moult patterns, movements, breeding or some other aspects of species' biology. In Britain it is increasingly difficult for the average ringer to discover something, although he/she can still contrib-

ute through schemes organised by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). The Constant Effort Site (CES) scheme is one such participatory scheme. A ringer running a CES chooses a site and erects the same number of nets in the same places on each of 12 visits in specified periods during the breeding and post-breeding season in successive years. Details of all adult and young birds caught or retrapped are passed on to the BTO who can then look at such things as annual changes in breeding success.

I contrasted my ringing activities in the UK (my CES site, pulli ringing in nestboxes and catching river birds for a long-term study of Dippers *Cinclus cinclus* and Grey Wagtails *Motacilla cinerea* along rivers) with ringing at a 4 ha site in *Acacia* bush 30 km northeast of Gaborone. Between March 1996 and February 2000 some 3667 birds of 82 species were caught at this site. Only 24 species were caught in numbers of 20 or more, the most numerous being Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis* (637 individuals), and the next most numerous being Masked Weaver *Plo-*